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The Corona Pandemic And The Middle East

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A Middle Eastern Overview

The public health crisis and challenge of COVID-19's impact on most of the Middle East, as on other parts of the non-Western World, has been limited. While the extent of the pandemic in Iran and Turkey has been significant, the figures cited by and for most of the Arab World have been low, certainly low when compared to the early concern that high density (in countries like Egypt and in the Gaza Strip) and weak public health systems could lead to an exponential spread of the disease. These modest figures derive from several factors and forces at work: limited exposure to international travel, a young median age of the population, limited testing, a sense of shame leading to concealment, and, in some cases, a deliberate government policy of reporting lower figures. Also, most governments in the region deserve credit for effective, and rigorous lockdown policies. The pandemic's major impact on the Middle East has been economic. It has exacerbated economic crises in several Middle Eastern countries and created fresh problems for other parts of the region. These effects have been felt and magnified by the sharp decline in oil prices caused partly by oversupply and price wars and in part by the decline in consumption brought about by the pandemic. The decline in energy prices and consumption has directly affected oil and gas exporting countries, and indirectly countries depending on aid from these countries and on remittances from guest workers.

All told, the pandemic has not led to major changes in the patterns and trends of the region's politics. These have been defined in recent years and on the eve of the pandemic's outbreak by economic crises, popular unrest, the structural weakness of several states, American distancing, Russian assertiveness, Iranian and Turkish activism, and contradictory trends in Arab-Israeli relations. During the past ten weeks the following major developments and changes took place:

- Iran has been severely affected by the pandemic and the regime has obviously failed in dealing with it. It has not responded effectively and tried unsuccessfully to conceal the full extent of the damage, thus further undermining public trust that had been shaken by earlier instances of regime dishonesty. The economic hardship caused by US sanctions has been aggravated by the sharp decline in oil revenues and yet, the regime's aggressive regional, foreign and security policies, manifested by the nuclear program, involvement in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and the Gulf, and the confrontation with the US, Saudi Arabia and Israel, have not been significantly moderated. The two changes whose full significance has yet to be determined are the redeployment of Iranian troops in Syria to the eastern and northern parts of the country and a milder policy toward the US in Iraq.
- Iran's regional rival, Saudi Arabia, has handled the public health challenge well, but the ambitious domestic reforms planned by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the regional policy, primarily Riyadh's intervention in the Yemeni civil war, and its relationship with Washington, have all been affected by economic contraction and the decline in oil prices. Saudi Arabia's oil policy led to an unprecedented clash with President Trump who threatened to pull some US troops and weapon systems from the Kingdom unless it agreed to reduce the flow of oil into the international market.
- Turkey has been hard hit by the pandemic and the severity of the health crisis has been a serious challenge to the leadership of President Erdogan who manages the country's health policy. In an effort to cope with the economic crisis, Erdogan has sought to improve his relationship with Washington and distance himself from Moscow (most notably by suspending the purchase of S400 ground-to-air missiles). Turkey's regional ambitions are now focused on Libya and the eastern Mediterranean, and it continues its massive intervention in Syria that is more defensive than expansionist in nature.
- Syria has reported very low figures of people affected by the disease, but the regime's credibility in this matter as in others is very low. There has been no progress in consolidating Bashar al-Assad's hold over the country. The international economic crisis and the loss of income in the Arab Gulf states further reduced the prospect of international aid to the country's reconstruction. Bashar himself became embroiled in a political and business conflict with his cousin, Rami Makhlouf, "the family's banker".
- Iraq and Lebanon were rattled during the month leading up to the Corona crisis by massive popular demonstrations against the enduring political crisis and its impact on daily life. In both countries, there was an anti-Iranian dimension to the popular demonstrations. In Iraq, some progress was made when a government was finally formed. In Lebanon, there are no signs of progress towards stability. Analysts and observers are taking a close look at the popular protests in Iraq and Lebanon as potential indications of a revival of popular unrest that could possibly lead to the second wave of what was known in 2010-2011 as the "Arab Spring". The future course of the pandemic and the scale of economic damage could play an important role in such a development.

- Both major international powers active in the Middle East, the US and Russia, are preoccupied with massive outbreaks of the pandemic. The two most prominent actions taken by the Trump Administration in the Middle East have been his confrontation with the Saudi Crown Prince and the mission of Secretary of State Pompeo to Israel to deal with the issue of annexation of parts of the West Bank to Israel (see below), Chinese investments in Israeli infrastructure and Iran's nuclear and missile program. Russia signaled its unhappiness with Bashar al-Assad's failure to move on with reconciliation, political reform and reconstruction with a series of critical articles in the Russian press. China has continued to invest in building its network of infrastructure projects to the point of provoking massive US pressure on Israel to reduce, if not to suspend altogether, Chinese investments in such projects as the Haifa harbor and the massive desalination program in the south of the country.
- On the Arab-Israeli front, several positive developments could be noticed such as continued tacit cooperation with several Arab Gulf states, this time in the context of fighting the Corona crisis, the close cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in dealing with the crisis, and the mutual restraint displayed by Israel and Hamas in Gaza. These positive trends have been overshadowed by the prospect of annexation of parts of the West Bank which threaten to affect Israel's peace treaties with Jordan and Egypt, its tacit relationship with the Gulf states, and its direct relationship with the Palestinian Authority and the Hamas government in Gaza.

Israel and the Pandemic

In Israel, there has been one clear winner from the crisis, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Several months ago, Netanyahu, facing a criminal trial, indicted on three charges of bribery and breach of trust, and unable to win three successive parliamentary elections, was finally able to present his fifth government on May 17. His survival is due to several forces at work but it was the Covid-19 crisis that provided his challenger, Benny Gantz, with both the motivation and the pretext on March 26 to announce that he was joining Netanyahu in an emergency national unity government in order to deal with the crisis ramifications for Israel and its economy.

The formation of this new government ended a lengthy political crisis that began in December 2018 when the Knesset, Israel's parliament, was dissolved in order to hold a new election. A new party, Blue and White, was formed in order to challenge Netanyahu in the April 2019 parliamentary elections. The party was formed by three former chiefs of staff of the IDF and one professional politician. The new party, Blue and White, was essentially a centrist entity which also included a right-wing component. Its leader, retired General Gantz, was able for the first time in many years to present a serious challenge to Netanyahu and within a matter of weeks was able to win 35 out of 120 seats in the Israeli parliament. However, this was not enough. The parliament was essentially divided between a right-wing and a center-left bloc, and neither was able to reach the magic figure of 61 order to form a government. The result was two additional rounds of elections in September 2019 and in March 2020, at the end of which the paralysis could not be resolved.

One of the most significant aspects of these rounds of elections was the new role of Israel's Arab minority of some 20%. In earlier election campaigns low voting percentage and the fractiousness of its representatives denied this minority a proper representation in the political system. The formation of a unified list, a higher percentage of voting and a shift of orientation from Arab Palestinian nationalism to a quest for participation in Israeli life gave the Arab minority a larger number of Knesset members (up to 15) and created a situation in which the centrist parties were willing to collaborate with the Arab Joint List. The term cooperate should be qualified - three members of the coalition put together by Blue and White were not willing to vote for a government supported by the Arab Joint List, thus denying Gantz the possibility of forming a government after the March 2020 elections.

The three election campaigns of 2019/2020 were to a large extent conducted over the question of whether Netanyahu, as a man about to face a criminal trial, should and could be Israel's prime minister. According to Israeli law, a cabinet minister under indictment has to resign his / her post, while the prime minister is exempt from this stipulation, since his / her resignation would mean a resignation of the whole cabinet. Since December 2016, when the open investigation of Netanyahu of suspected bribery and breach of faith issues was initiated by the Israeli Police under the supervision of the Attorney General, Israel's political system has been fully preoccupied with these issues. Netanyahu has been able to build a right-wing bloc, composed of his own Likud party, the Orthodox parties and the party representing the West Bank settlers, that has kept him in power and given him a "base" that led him safely through three elections. This phenomenon has to do with Netanyahu's own charisma, but also with several underlying forces at work, first and foremost the fusion of the dream of Greater Israel, ultra-Orthodox championship of religion's role in Israeli life and politics, and Sephardi resentment of the traditional elites into a right-wing hegemony in Israeli politics.

Benny Gantz's still inexplicable decision on March 26 to join forces with Netanyahu, thus splitting his own party, resulted in a peculiar political arrangement. Israel now has a national unity government based on parity between Netanyahu and his allies on the one hand, and Blue and White and its partners on the other, even though Blue and White has been reduced to 17 members of Knesset. Rotation means that at this point Netanyahu is the Prime Minister and Benny Gantz is the Defense Minister, and they are to change places 18 months from now. The unusually large government will have to deal with several major challenges, including the economic ramifications of the pandemic and the issue of annexation. This issue became a prominent item on the agenda as a result of the publication in January 2020 of President Trump's plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This essentially pro-Israeli plan does call for a two-state solution, but it also envisages Israel's annexation of the Jordan Valley and the areas of Israeli settlements in return for territorial compensation to the Palestinian in the south of Israel. This led to pressure by the settlers and the populist right wing of Netanyahu's own party to proceed with annexation even without a full implementation of the plan. As mentioned above, such a step is likely to produce sharp reactions among the Palestinians and in the Arab world as well as in Europe. It is not at all clear what the Trump Administration's own view of the matter is.